

NATO, Cooperative Security, and the Middle East - Status and Prospects; Experts Workshop, Vienna, 16 December 2016

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NATO, Cooperative Security, and the Middle East – Status and Prospects

Experts Workshop, Vienna, 16 December 2016

Edited by
Hakan Akbulut

This event was co-sponsored by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization

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This event was co-sponsored by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization

Introduction

In May 2014, the Austrian Institute for International Affairs (oiip) held a workshop on NATO's partnerships in collaboration with NATO's Public Diplomacy Division. Bringing together experts from the academia, NATO, and national executives, the event looked into the evolution of NATO's partnership policy in general and discussed the partnership between the Alliance and five Western European countries, that is Austria, Finland, Ireland, Switzerland, and Sweden, in particular against the backdrop of the Russian incursion into Ukraine and deteriorating relations with the West. The level of engagement on part of these countries, their respective attitudes towards and expectations from NATO, and the potential future trajectory of these partnerships were explored and highlighted. The outcomes of the proceedings were summarized in a lengthy report and made available to the public on oiip's website at http://www.oiip.ac.at/fileadmin/Unterlagen/Dateien/Publikationen/NATO_Report_FINAL_240614.pdf.

Given the developments in the Middle East, especially in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, it seemed timely and necessary to continue such debate and analysis on NATO's partnerships, this time though respectively redirecting attention towards the conflict torn area of the Middle East. This constituted the starting point for and the driving force behind the effort to organize a follow-up event on cooperative security as conceived and operationalized by NATO and its partners in the Middle East. The event focused on the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) that was launched in 2004 as well as on NATO's partnership with and experiences in Iraq. The speakers' list included experts (in some cases academics, in others officials) from Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Austria, Ireland, Germany, and NATO. Moreover, local experts as well as diplomats based in Vienna, too, attended the workshop.

This report consists of three parts: The first part offers a brief introduction into the topic of NATO partnerships in general and ICI more specifically. The second part compiles three papers presented at the workshop on the preferences, perspectives, and policies of Bahrain, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) relating to cooperation with NATO. The third part summarizes the presentations of all workshop participants and accompanying discussions without making any explicit attributions as the event was held under Chatham House Rule. All speakers participated in the workshop in a personal capacity and expressed exclusively their personal views and assessment. Moreover, as this summary incorporates all different views expressed, a participant will unlikely endorse all arguments to be found herein.

PART I

NATO's Partnerships – A Backgrounder

NATO has obviously undergone major transformation ever since the Cold War ended in terms of membership and both topical and geographical reach and coverage. Alongside collective defense, crisis management and cooperative security were defined as the Alliance's core tasks in its overhauled Strategic Concept in 2010. In fact, they are all interlinked and the partnerships, even though usually attributed to the field of cooperative security, are seemingly of a crosscutting nature and span all three areas. In terms of many Eastern European countries, partnerships acted as a stepping-stone on the way to full membership and helped to prepare them for admission. As in Europe and elsewhere, partnerships have been conceived as a sort of transmission belt to project security and stability corresponding to the notion of cooperative security and have helped to foster compatibility between NATO forces and those of partner countries, consequently leading to the expansion of the pool of potential contributors to crisis management operations. Of course, the concept of partnership has not been static as such and has transformed over time. For instance, rather than reacting to offers or initiatives by NATO, partners have started raising issues and topics of interest and pushing them upwards within the Alliance. To cite an example, the Swiss brought up the issue of Private Security Companies, the Swedes initiated discussions on the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, while the Austrians facilitated discussions on the Protection of Civilians (cf. Gärtner/Akbulut/Iancu 2014, 8).

Moreover, NATO has been partnering with countries of different political making and military capabilities located in various parts of the world. The *Partnership for Peace* comprising countries of the Euro-Atlantic area constituted the first format and was later supplemented with the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD), the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) as well as partners across the globe including countries such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines or Thailand, but also India, Vietnam, Indonesia or Pakistan. Overall, as of today, the Alliance counts 41 partner countries alongside a number of international organizations, such as the UN, the EU, or the OSCE.

In an effort to streamline the various programs, the Alliance decided to offer all partners a *Partnership Cooperation Menu* of around 1,400 activities, which “touch on virtually every field of NATO activity, including defence-related work, defence reform, defence policy and planning, civil-military relations, education and training, military-to-military cooperation and exercises, civil emergency

planning and disaster response, and cooperation on science and environmental issues” to choose from (NATO 2016). So-called *Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programmes* (IPCP) that “are drawn upon, among other things, the activities in the extensive Partnership Cooperation Menu, according to each country’s specific interests and needs” form the basis for cooperation between the Alliance and “each partner that requests one” (NATO 2014c). These can be extended with additional tools depending on the “specific areas of cooperation they wish to develop with the Alliance” (ibid.). At the Wales Summit of September 2014, the Alliance, for instance, endorsed two new initiatives aiming at reinforcing interoperability between the forces of NATO countries and partners (*Partnership Interoperability Initiative*¹) as well as enhancing the defense and security related capacities of partners and others interested in such support (*Defence and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative*). The latter can include “strategic level advice”, education and training as well as assistance in “areas such as logistics, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, civil emergency planning and cyber defence” (ibid.). While Georgia, Jordan and Moldova were to become the first addressees of this new initiative, in July 2015, NATO also decided to extend a “defence capacity building package” to Iraq (NATO 2015a). “The package includes measures of support in seven priority areas: advice on security sector reform; countering improvised explosive devices, explosive ordnance disposal and de-mining; civil military planning; cyber defence; military medicine and medical assistance; military training; and civil emergency planning” (ibid.). The related NATO announcement explicitly holds that this package complements assistance given by the Global Coalition against ISIL, the EU, the UN and others (ibid.).

It is worth mentioning at this stage that both initiatives need to be seen and assessed against the backdrop of two main developments: NATO finishing its main combat mission in Afghanistan, which moved the Alliance and partners to look for ways to sustain and reinforce relations in general and interoperability in particular in the ensuing period; and growing uncertainty and insecurity felt especially in Eastern Europe in the face of developments in the Ukraine along with conflict and turmoil in the Middle East confronting the Alliance with a need to find ways and avenues for projecting security and stability and assisting partners and others in enhancing their defense capabilities.

¹ Within this framework, the *Interoperability Platform* was launched in Wales comprising 24 partners, including, among others, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), “that have demonstrated their commitment to reinforce their interoperability with NATO” (NATO 2014b). Moreover, five countries (Australia, Finland, Georgia, Jordan, and Sweden) were granted the “Enhanced Opportunity Partner” status, which opens the door “for deeper, more significant and more tailored cooperation, both practical and political [...] and also means greater access to exercises, evaluations and training” (Vershbow 2015) in light of outstanding contributions to NATO operations so far.

Istanbul Cooperative Initiative plus Iraq – A Brief Introduction

At the Istanbul Summit in June 2004, the Alliance launched two major initiatives aimed at enhancing cooperation with the countries of the Middle East and fostering security and stability in the region: Responding to a request by the Iraqi government, NATO decided to put into place the *NATO Training Mission-Iraq (NTI-I)*. As the mission's name already suggests, the basic aim thereof was to provide training to Iraqi military and police forces and assist in and coordinate equipment donation (see NATO 2015b). According to information put forward by the Alliance, “[f]rom 2004 to 2011, it trained over 5,000 military personnel and over 10,000 police personnel in Iraq. Nearly 2,000 courses were provided in Allied countries and over 115 million euro’s worth of military equipment and a total of over 17.5 million euros in trust fund donations from 26 Allies for training and education at NATO facilities” (ibid.). The mission ended in 2011 and was succeeded by a formal long-term partnership with the NATO-Iraq cooperation programme signed in September 2012. As noted above, in 2015, the partnership was further enhanced with the “defence capacity building package” offered by NATO.

At the same summit, “starting with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council,” NATO furthermore extended a cooperation offer to the countries of the “broader Middle East” within the framework of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (NATO 2004).² It was to focus on “practical cooperation where NATO can add value, notably in the defence and security fields” (ibid.). So far, four out of six members of the GCC have joined the Initiative: Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Even though Saudi Arabia and Oman have so far declined to formally accede to the Initiative, personnel from the two countries have attended courses at the NATO Defence College and both Oman and Saudi Arabia have engaged in a political dialogue with the Alliance and participated in “issue specific meetings – such as on anti-piracy, military cooperation or education” between NATO and ICI-countries (NATO 2014a).³ As outlined above, as official partner countries, ICI members have access to a broad range of activities in areas such as defence planning and transformation, civil-military relations, anti-terrorism, non-proliferation of WMD, border-security, disaster management etc. One core objective has of course been establishing and sustaining interoperability with NATO forces. ICI countries have not only been participating in respective exercises to these ends and sending personnel to attend education and training programs offered by NATO, they have also contributed to NATO operations on many instances. For instance, UAE⁴ and Bahrain contributed to ISAF whereas “Qatar and Kuwait have contributed in one way or the other to NATO’s efforts in Afghani-

² In principle, participation in ICI is not restricted to GCC countries. Other countries from the Middle East committing to its “aims and content” could join, too (Razoux 2010, 2).

³ Razoux (2010, 5) points out that the two countries “own 70 % of the GCC’s military potential and their armed forces are considered to be the most credible on the Arabian Peninsula.”

⁴ UAE also deployed troops to Kosovo (Razoux 2010, 3).

stan” (NATO 2004). Qatar and the UAE also participated in *Operation Unified Protector* (UOP) in Libya in 2011.

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PART II

Bahrain and NATO: Essentials of the Partnership and Obstacles

*A. Ashraf Mohammed Kishk*⁵

Introduction

Analyzing the relation between Bahrain and the NATO is important because Bahrain is one of four Gulf countries, which joined the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) launched by NATO in 2004 alongside Kuwait, UAE, and Qatar. In addition, Bahrain has security concerns that might be relatively different from the other Gulf countries. Moreover, Bahrain's geographical location gives the country opportunities to be an important regional partner in maintaining regional security by hosting the US Fifth Fleet. Such a location, however, caused many security challenges to Bahrain.

Security Challenges to the Kingdom of Bahrain

1) The Iranian threat

Iran is considered the first source of threat to Bahrain because of Iran's policies of rejecting to be in harmony with its regional environment since the Iranian revolution in 1979. This is because of the internal conflict in Iran between the concept of 'the state' and the concept of 'revolution'.⁶

The Iranian threat to Bahrain was reflected in several indicators, including the official hostile statements against Bahrain. The Iranian official hostile statements against Bahrain and the Gulf countries have amounted to 100 statements during the period from 2011 to 2015. They included 63 statement against the Kingdom of Bahrain and 37 statements against the other Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia.⁷

2) Cyber terrorism

Bahrain has achieved significant progress in the area of e-government, getting first position at the Arab level and the 24th position at the world level in 2016, in terms of e-government readiness, for

⁵ Dr., Researcher specialized in the Arabian Gulf security and Director of the Strategic Studies Program, Bahrain Center for Strategic, International and Energy Studies.

⁶ Ashraf Mohammed Kishk, Iran's role in the instability of the Gulf region. Araa (Perspectives) about the Gulf, pages 75-76, 2016.

⁷ Ashraf Mohammed Kishk, the Iranian official interference in the internal affairs of the Kingdom of Bahrain. Manama: Bahrain Center for Strategic, International and Energy Studies, 2015.

the fourth time since 2010.⁸ This makes Bahrain's vulnerability to a comprehensive electronic terrorist attack a possibility. The Bahraini government institutions sustained about 3,000 electronic attacks in the first half of 2016⁹

3) Imbalance in the regional balance of powers

According to the 2015 Military Balance annual report of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the active-duty military forces of the six GCC countries totaled 368,100; they include around 8,200 in Bahrain. This is compared to 475,000 active-duty armed forces in Iran, including 350,000 active-duty army troops and 125,000 troops in the Revolutionary Guards.¹⁰

4) Bahrain's concerns regarding changes in the international security alliances

Bahrain's concerns are growing regarding the possibility of change in these alliances.

5) Regional instability and its impact on Bahrain's security

Iranian interventions announced openly by Iranian officials. For example, Tehran's MP in the Iranian Shura Council (parliament) said, "Three Arab capitals have become controlled by Iran [...] following Iran's Islamic Revolution". "Sanaa became the fourth the capital, which is on its way to join the Iranian revolution," he added.¹¹ There is no doubt that the continued escalation of regional crises leads to implications for the security of the Kingdom of Bahrain at the sectarian and security levels.

The extent of Bahrain's Benefits from the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative

Bahrain has cooperated with the NATO at the political and military levels since joining the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative in 2005. At the military level, Bahrain has contributed, alongside NATO forces to training the Afghan police forces. At the level of bilateral cooperation, Bahrain has approved the individual partnership and cooperation programs with the NATO during the period from 2016-2018.

Bahrain's Advantages to be a Regional NATO Partner

1) The modernization of the Royal Bahraini Naval Forces during 1980s and 1990s

2) Bahrain's role concerning regional security and stability.

⁸ Bahrain maintains the first Arab position in the UN e-government report of 2016, Bahrain News Agency, 31 July 2016. <http://www.bna.bh/portal/news/737853>.

⁹ Three thousands electronic attacks on the government and its institutions in in six months. Akber Al-kaleej, 22 September 2016. <http://www.akhbar-alkhaleej.com/14062/article/41018.htm>).

¹⁰ The 2015 Military Balance. New York: International Institute for Strategic Studies.

¹¹ Iranian official: Sanaa has become the fourth Arab capital following us, 22 September 2014. <http://www.arabi21.com/story/777123>

- 3) Bahrain's readiness to intervene militarily in regional crises.
- 4) Bahrain's initiatives on countering terrorism (in November 2014, Bahrain hosted an international conference on combating terrorism finance).
- 5) Bahrain's distinguished relations with key NATO countries (in this regard, Bahrain and the UK concluded an agreement for setting up the British Royal Navy's Naval Support Facility).

Bahrain's Security and Defense Needs from NATO and Obstacles to Achieving Them

Bahrain's security and defense needs can be outlined in five questions reviewed below:

- 1) What is kind of security assistance that can be provided by the NATO to Bahrain in case of external aggression?
- 2) Is NATO ready to provide Bahrain with immediate security assistance in case of a comprehensive electronic attack similar to the case of Estonia in 2007?
- 3) What are the contributions that can be provided by NATO for achieving regional stability in general and regarding Yemen, Iraq and Syria in particular?
- 4) Is it possible that NATO be substitute to the United States as a guarantor of the security of Bahrain and the Gulf?
- 5) Is it possible that NATO provides Bahrain with more military support, especially in building modern military capabilities and technology?

Obstacles to cooperation between Bahrain and NATO:

- 1) The continued ambiguity of some terms, such as 'value added security'.
- 3) The gap between the many areas for cooperation included in the ICI and those achieved on the ground.
- 4) Difference in viewpoints between Bahrain and the NATO on the sources of terrorism.¹²
- 5) Continuation of difference in viewpoints between the Gulf countries in general and NATO.

¹² Niels, B. O., In Year of Summits, Weighing the Benefits and Challenges of NATO-GCC Cooperation, 15 April 2016, the Atlantic Council website. <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/in-year-of-summits-weighing-the-benefits-and-challenges-of-nato-gcc-cooperation>

Oman Security Perspectives and NATO Relations¹³

Cuneyt Yenigun¹⁴

Oman has been trying to pursue “active neutralization” especially after new world order. Internal factors of it could be lined up as insurgency (1965-1975), illiteracy, poverty, harsh restrictions, lack of modern government structure, poor educational and health facilities, weak infrastructure, undeveloped country's natural resources. External factors of it include instable Middle East, British withdrawal from the Gulf 1971, declaration of the United Arab Emirates 1971, 1973 Oil Crisis, Gulf Countries conflict with Iran during 1970s, Iran-Iraq war in 1980s, Gulf Wars 1991 & 2003. In today's world, Oman Foreign Policy could be highlighted with four pillars. a) The development and maintenance of good relations with all of Oman's neighbors; b) An outward looking and internationalist outlook, as befits Oman's geographical location and longstanding maritime traditions; c) A pragmatic approach to bilateral relations, emphasizing underlying geostrategic realistic rather than temporary ideological positions; d) To search for security and stability through cooperation and peace rather than conflict (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016).

Oman tries with the “active neutralization” policy to balance its relations with three main actors:

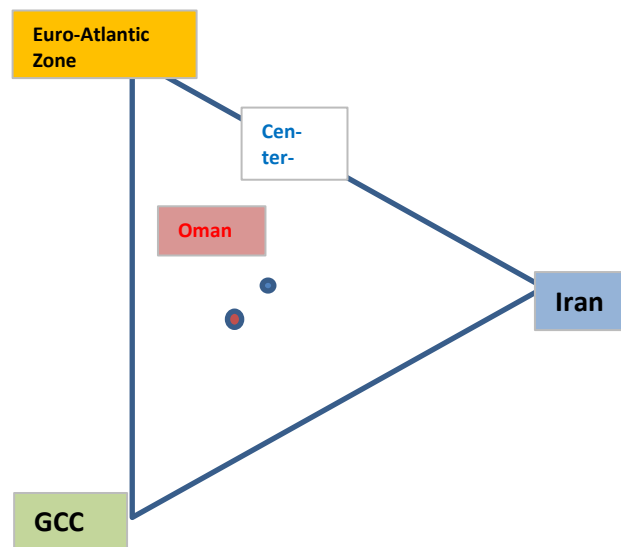


Figure: Oman's Struggling on “Active Neutralization” and Balance Policy

¹³ Some information in this study have been benefited from SQU-CEPS Internal Grant, Project Title: “Oman's Global Image”, IG/EPS/POLS/16/01

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With the Euro-Atlantic Zone, especially with the UK and US, she has special relations in political, economic and security areas. Oman has good security relations with the US. Oman swung to the US with the Facilities Access Agreement signing. During that time, it was the only accord of any Arab state with the US. This action had shown the steadfastness of Sultan Qaboos regarding his vision of his country's long-term security stability (Kechichian, 2015). US-Oman relations had established two major accords involving US facility access to Oman's military installations and the Joint Commission for Economic and Technical Cooperation outlining the provision of economic aid to Oman which existed up to the 1990s (Oman-US Relations, 2015). It is acknowledged that Oman is the staunchest supporter of the American presence in the Gulf. Oman had allowed the presence of the US Airforce including logistics that supported the 26,000 strong contingents. The USAF Prepositioned War Reserve Material provides logistical and operational needs of the three airbase installations in Oman. The development was done parallel to the upgrading of Oman's facility and equipment in its air force. There are three identified installations, namely Seeb, Masirah and Thumrait. Seeb serves as the major transport and logistics hub; Masirah deals as reconnaissance for air defense and they both handle surveillance operations both on land and at sea (Seeb International Airport, 2015).

Allowing the US to have access to its military installation, the Sandhurst-educated Sultan Qaboos is known as a military strategist who has always perceived that a US presence in the Gulf region guarantees the stability of security in the region. In return as a gesture of appreciation, the US has undertaken a deal of Free Trade Agreement with Oman to help propel its economy (Katzman, 2008). On March 23, 2010 the Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs, Andrew J. Shapiro, and Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Alexander Vershbow visited Oman and Bahrain to advance the talk regarding a wider coverage of political and military concerns in the region. The talk mainly focused on dealing with a strategic partnership with GCC primarily for addressing the concerns on security cooperation and terrorist activities in the Gulf region (Gulf Security Dialogue, 2010).

Oman has always had good security and cooperation relations with the Gulf Countries. Because of common religion, common history, very similar culture, almost same thinking style, joint economic projects, being in the same region. Oman has mutual acceptance with the Gulf countries. From recent history until today, Oman sees her security and other relations with the GCC as a "win-win" picture. Before GCC was established, Oman took a side with the Gulf Countries to constitute an independent armament program for the common threats in 1975. Even in 1976, at the Muscat Meeting, Oman had proposed to establish common patrolling army among eight Gulf countries (today's GCC

countries, Iran, Iraq) to protect the Strait of Hormuz, but it was not supported by the other countries at that time. In 1981, she eagerly joined the Chiefs of General Staff of GCC (1st meeting) in Riyadh. She supported Joint Defense Systems of establishing Peninsula Shield Forces (PSF-military wing of the GCC) in 1982. She sent her military portion to PSF in Hafar Al Batin (next to King Khalid Military city, Saudi Arabia) in 1984. Oman also signed Joint (Collective) Self-Defense Agreement of the GCC in the 21st Session of Supreme Council in Manama in December 2000. During the Second Gulf War, she actively sent her soldiers to the PSF, which consisted of two ships and 10,000 troops to patrol at Kuwaiti borders. After 9/11, she signed GCC's Counter Terrorism Agreement in 2002 and joined Permanent Anti-Terrorism Committee, which worked very actively with Interpol in 2006. She became one of the signatories of the "Joint Defense Strategy" of the GCC to defend sovereignty and stability in the region in 2009. PSF's intervention to Bahrain in 2011, Oman voted positively, but did not send her troops to Bahrain alongside Saudi Arabia, Qatar and UAE. But, on the other hand, she wants to put enough area to have her own state intimacy at the regional level. Although Oman has good relations with GCC countries, she wants to keep those relations at "cooperation level" not "union level". While Saudi Arabia has been struggling to transform GCC to a Gulf Union (GU), Oman has explicitly announced twice that "if GCC becomes union Oman will be out of it" in 2011 and 2013. It should not be forgotten that GCC was established because of three main threats to all Gulf countries: Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988, and USRR and China supported communist threat in the southern region (Yemen and Dhofar). At that time, in the 1980s, Oman had more willingness to tie with the other Gulf countries because of security reasons; but not today. She thinks balance and active neutralization policy is pretty much more effective, useful and beneficial for Oman today.

On the other hand, Oman has good international and economic relations with Iran especially in the last three decades. However, she has been very attentive to not establishing any security or military ties with her. But it could be said that Oman has the best international relations among the GCC with Iran. Because of this reason, Oman has become always "back door" for the West to reach Iran and mediated several times. This topic will be studied in the next sub-title. Economic relations are rising between two actors. Concerning the business relations between Oman and Iran, there have been numerous positive improvements throughout the years. The volume of remote exchange between the two nations has expanded extensively. The pace and beat of business visits between agents and exchange designations have expanded as of late. Exchange trade between the two nations has expanded essentially a year ago to exceed \$1 billion (Al-Lawati, 2015). This is expected to surpass \$1 billion before the end of 2015. Iran's fare as oil side effects, bitumen, oil, chemicals, minerals, metal

items including iron sheets, round bars, concoction composts, foodstuff, stones, pottery and development materials. “Real re-import things from Oman incorporate mechanical hardware and gear and also vehicles which are sold to Iran at lower rates”. In 2013, President Rouhani’s visit to Oman had marked the conclusion of the \$60 billion arrangement where Iran will provide Oman in 15 years with a daily supply of 28 million cubic meters of gas. The 400 km pipeline from Iran to Sohar Port in Oman will serve as a conduit on the agreed gas supply (Iran Inks Gas Deal with Oman, 2015). A joint commission between Iran and Oman was convened to talk about the plan of action regarding the intent of Iran to invest in the Al Wusta Governorate involving a smelter for which funding will be taken from the initial \$4 billion investment outlook of Iran to Oman.

Oman's present part as a go-between with Houthi delegates and US authorities stays steady with Qaboos' recorded way of dealing with a remote approach. As the world's just Ibadi greater part Muslim nation, Oman does not have the same stakes in Sunni-Shia fights as do numerous Arab administrations and non-state performers. All things considered, Muscat sees continuous provincial clashes as a risky danger to dependability in the Strait of Hormuz, as rising partisan temperatures in the Gulf further increase hostility between Riyadh and Tehran (Wagner and Cafiero, 2015).

Oman has played mediatory roles between Iran, US and the UK in the last decade. Three Americans were captured in July 2009 close to Iran's fringe with Iraq and sentenced to eight years in jail. The discharged detainees left for Tehran's airplane terminal in a caravan escorted by Omani authorities and including the envoy of Switzerland who spoke on behalf of the Americans in Iran. This demonstration created confidence in the US towards Oman in mediating towards Iran (Reuters, 2011). From July 2012 to October 2013, the UK interests in Iran were handled by the Embassy of Sweden; on the other hand, Iran’s portfolio in the UK was held at the Embassy of Oman. In November 2013, both countries ended the arrangement of having their respective interests handled by Sweden and Oman, the designated non-resident charges d'affaires in exploring bilateral talks. Oman has played big role in Mediation in 5+1-Iran Nuclear Talks also. Oman had facilitated the initial talks between the US and Iran. The talk especially on nuclear accord continued discreetly involving Deputy Secretary of State, William Burns and his Iranian counterpart, Majid Ravanchi which was held in March 2013.(Gupta, 2015) In November 23, 2013, Oman's part as a mediator of the US and Iran was defined as embodied (Joint Plan of Action-JPA) on the nuclear talks with the P5+1. With the official sanction of the US allowing banks from Oman to transfer funds to the Central Bank of Iran, banks in Oman had significantly facilitated financial assistance to the JPA including the sales of Iran’s oil sales (Katzman, 2013).The rapprochement between the USA and Iran was successful due to the presence of a mediator per

ceived to be neutral or impartial like Oman. Oman and the USA established excellent relations while keeping their healthy association with Iran. This empowered Sultan Qaboos in mediating between the US and Iran, which is a key element in international relations based on a liberalist point of view. Evidently, the point of contention was based on the integrity and trust to an individual rather than to a state in general.

Oman's neutrality and NATO relations are interrelated on those lines. Since joining the UN in 1971, Oman has practiced neutrality policy and always ensured in many occasions that it will not join the wars of others. Also, like all other neutral members in the UN, Oman understood membership in the UN would not affect its active neutral policy. In accordance with that understanding Oman has implemented all the consequences of membership, such as contributing troops to the UN operations in the First Gulf War in Kuwait in 1990 according to the UN Security Council resolution 687 (1990), and on Afghanistan's War following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, referring to the UN Security Council Resolution 1378 (2001), Oman allowed the NATO forces to use its airspace and air bases (Katzman, 2016). On the other hand, Oman also understood clearly that regardless of the consequences of the UN membership, the Security Council can grant exemption for certain countries from conducting measures in order to maintain the neutrality status of neutral members and to avoid decisions or measures that are not fitting with the neutrality of those members. Based on this point of view, Oman has refused numerous US and British requests to dispatch troops for UN peacekeeping mission.

Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) was not accepted but never rejected by Oman. There are several reasons for Oman to pursue this policy:

- to refrain from spoiling ties with Iran, because "partnership" and "membership" are confused among the Gulf states and Iran. They could see "partnership" as high level of action and cooperation. Negative perceptions (or reputation) of NATO (Gaub, 2013) as being a military arm of US policy, although Oman has worked together with the US very closely in recent conflicts,
- Not to harm Oman's active neutralization foreign policy or not to imbalance triangle policy of Oman,
- Some current obstacles in front of ICI (Razoux, 2010) and NATO members.
- The lack of common strategic vision in the GCC, especially about Iran, Iraq and Yemen,

- Preference of bilateral agreements with the US, UK and France instead of NATO. Like the other GCC countries, Oman sees more benefits from bilateral agreements; because they are more flexible, open to quick decisions, and more effective.
- Fear of the intervening of NATO in domestic politics. Refusal of Status of Forces Agreements (SOFA) that NATO forces would be deployed on their territory,
- The Gulf's preference for dealing with people rather than institutions in diplomacy, or difficulty in defining the GCC as a "unitary actor" (Dessi, 2013)

But after all, foreign policies change according to new developments; and Oman foreign policy depends on “ifs” like the others. Should NATO become less interventionist and more active in “cooperative defense”, but “not collective defense”, Oman would be interested. Forensic (intelligence services) training courses could be attractive for Oman. In addition, NATO’s contribution to military technology and modernization could be reasonable. If President Trump voids Nuclear Agreement with Iran, Oman’s foreign policy columns will be jeopardized. Because Oman had been trying to ameliorate two sides’ relations for a long time. If Iran and the West become antagonistic, and if she needs to choose one side, Oman will not sacrifice US or UK relations for Iran. Under those circumstances maybe she will get closer to the ICI. If Iran and the West (and GCC) relations get better, it will help Oman’s current foreign policy.

There are also some obstacles that ICI faces in light of disagreements among NATO members (Yenigun, 2015):

- The reluctance of some new members to accept NATO's engagement in the Gulf,
- Energy deals, arms sales and civil nuclear cooperation programs fuel rivalry among the great powers within the NATO,
- NATO's cuts of financial budgets and high cost of defense programs avert cooperation in ICI,
- Hesitation to become involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Conclusion

Oman was the first Gulf state to formally allow the US military to use its national facilities. It has hosted US forces in military operations since 1980 and works CT and anti-piracy actions with the US and indirectly NATO. Unlike the other GCC countries, although Oman has good relations with Iran, the US or the West have not criticized its current relations, perhaps to use it as a mediator or to keep open an informal back – channel to negotiate with Iran, in necessary times. Oman officially has not joined to the ICI launch, but has already military ties with NATO indirectly via US military bases. The Oman-US facilities access agreement was signed in 1980 and renewed four times (most recently in

2010), the US can use Oman's airbases in Muscat (Seeb), Thumrait and Masirah Island.(Katzman, 2013). It seems Oman is cautious that the “NATO” title will plague Iran more than the US forces. It looks like Oman will keep her close ties with the Euro-Atlantic zone and good relations with NATO members, but in the same time she will continue good relations with the GCC member and Iran. She will struggle to follow her active neutralization and balancing policy within the power triangle in the world stage.

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The UAE's Relations with NATO

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My presentation includes two parts. In the first part, I will describe the UAE relationship with NATO. In the second part, I will analyze the relations with NATO in the context of international relations.

The UAE joined the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative in 2004. It joined at the time of the initiation of the program that is aimed at promoting long-term regional and global security by forging relations with countries of the Middle East.¹ The relationship with NATO is of high importance to the UAE. It is handled personally by Sheik Abdullah Al Nahyan, the country's foreign minister, and Anwar Gargash, the minister of state for foreign affairs.

In 2012, the UAE became the first and only country in the Middle East or North Africa to open a mission to NATO. The realm of the UAE-NATO relationship has included joint consultations and exercises in numerous areas, including maritime security, counter-piracy, and energy security.²

In October 2016, NATO and the UAE have signed an Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP). The Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme takes NATO-UAE political and practical cooperation a step further. It sets out in detail more areas for enhanced bilateral engagement. It includes practical cooperation in NATO-led operations and missions, enhanced interoperability, crisis management, civil emergency planning, capacity building, counter-terrorism, education and training.³

Despite not being part of the military alliance, the UAE was given observer status at the NATO summit in Warsaw 2014, and in 2016. The UAE has presented several security initiatives including, deradicalisation programs (Abu Dhabi is the home of Hedaya which is a prime center to induce deradicalization), intergovernmental dialogue, coordinated security operations, intelligence-sharing.⁴

In March 2016, the secretary general of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg praised the UAE for its contribution to NATO-led missions in Bosnia, Libya and Afghanistan.⁵

Afghanistan: The UAE was the only Arab country contributing forces to the mission in Afghanistan. The UAE has kept elite ground troops in Afghanistan for 11 years. Their activities have included conducting raids and training Afghan commandos in cooperation with U.S. Special Operations forces.

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Since 2012, the UAE sent six F-16s to support the NATO-led security mission in Afghanistan. Their deployment to Kandahar occurred as European nations were reducing their troop levels in the country. Emiratis Pilot has showed skill and prowess in conducting missions. The UAE and Australia were the only non-NATO nations allowed to fly such missions.⁶ In addition to participating to bombing operations, the Emirati stabilization force had served alongside American Green Beret Special Forces in Helmand Province.⁷

Bosnia-Kosovo: The UAE was among the first non-NATO states to express support for NATO's air operations. They have dedicated Apache attack helicopters to the NATO intervention in Kosovo. The UAE also participated in peacekeeping operations, and provided humanitarian assistance during and after the conflict.⁸

Libya: The UAE and Qatar were the only Arab countries to participate in the NATO-led military campaign against Muammar Qaddafi's regime in Libya.⁹

In order to understand the UAE-NATO relationship, it is important to view it from a foreign relations lens. It is important to see the perceived threats facing the UAE. It is also important to examine the UAE's approach in facing those threats. The UAE has two main perceived threats: political Islam and the growing influence of Iran. Those threats have significantly increased since the start of the Arab Spring in 2011.

In order to analyze the UAE approach in facing those threats, it is important to analyze the geopolitical situation. The UAE, like other GCC countries, is facing American retrenchment. The American retrenchment is erroneously analyzed by some as the by-product of Obama's policy that favors non-intervention. However, American retrenchment reflects a general popular tendency in the US that negatively views any intervention in the Middle East. This is a departure from the Carter era where in 1980's State of the Union, he declared that the US will use military power in order to protect oil installations in the Arab Gulf. The tragic events of September 11 as well as the American failure in Iraq have created a desire in America to disengage from the region. This attitude was exhibited in the various presidential candidates, who have put as a main point in the campaign program the weaning of America from its dependency on Middle Eastern oil.

The US is not showing the eagerness it used to show before to support the Arab Gulf States. According to the New York Times, the Emiratis have asked the US Special Forces stationed in the Abu Dhabi for support in the ground operation in Aden. Fearing to be dragged into the conflict, the American

military refused. They have also asked the Pentagon for support July 2015, the request was also declined. Nevertheless; the Emiratis conducted the planning for operation by themselves and succeeded.¹⁰ This is only an example to show how the UAE as well as other Gulf states are realizing they need an alternative to American protection.

From this perspective, the UAE realizes the importance of strengthening the alliance with NATO. However, it is important to say that the relation with NATO is not the only alternative to the relationship with the US. NATO, for its part, seeks closer ties with the Gulf States at least partially to isolate Russia. NATO has been taking a greater role in the region. They are conducting training and capacity building operations in Iraq for its military.

However, Abu Dhabi is attempting to diversify its great power foreign policy. They have reached out to China and India.* They have deepened their relation with Russia. In the past five years, Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed has met Russian President Vladimir Putin seven times. These meetings have increased the scope of cooperation between the two countries. Consequently, trade and defense ties have markedly increased.¹¹

In this perspective, UAE is drawing closer relation with NATO. However, it operates in a framework, as not to jeopardize its relation or the relation building with other players. Hence, the UAE weighs carefully every commitment it makes to NATO in order not to alienate itself from other players, who can offer potential support. Therefore, any tie to NATO has to include a significant commitment to its security in order to justify any loss of relation with another player.

On the other hand, the Iranian threat has drawn Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain closer together. The UAE is also forging a relation with Saudi Arabia. They participated with the Saudi forces in Bahrain and are taking an active role in the war in Yemen. Therefore, the relation with NATO is also governed by the GCC integration and the relation with Russia as well as China and India.

In addition to diversifying its alliances, the UAE is taking a more assertive role. This is a shift from its previous policy that was only concerned with homeland security and was more focused on reconnaissance and surveillance. Today, the UAE is trying to play a larger regional role and a more active role in the Gulf security. In this respect, the UAE appears to be constructing a new port next to Assab International Airport in Eritrea, which could become its first permanent military base in a foreign country. The purpose of this base is to offer future protection to Bab Al Mandeb.¹²

- 1 http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_58787.htm?
- 2 http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_128753.htm
- 3 http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_136138.htm
- 4 <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/benefit-for-all-as-uae-delegation-observes-nato-talks>
- 5 http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_128753.htm
- 6 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-the-uae-the-united-states-has-a-quiet-potent-ally-nicknamed-little-sparta/2014/11/08/3fc6a50c-643a-11e4-836c-83bc4f26eb67_story.html?utm_term=.972ed2027ae7
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- 9 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/26/world/africa/26libya.html?pagewanted=all>
- 10 http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/14/world/middleeast/yemen-saudi-us.html?_r=0
- 11 <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/nato-summit-special-series-united-arab-emirates>
- 12 <http://www.janes.com/article/59561/uae-likely-to-be-building-a-naval-facility-in-eritrea>

* China and the United Arab Emirates agreed to create a \$10 billion co-investment fund to make strategic deals around the world

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-12-14/u-a-e-china-create-10-billion-strategic-investment-fund-ii5x83pb>

UAE and India enhance defense ties. UAE is India's second largest trading partner and naval cooperation between the two countries have increased steadily since the inaugural Navy-to-Navy Staff Talks in Jan 07, which covered the entire gamut of IN-UAEN cooperation

<https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-navy%E2%80%99s-western-fleet-ships-visit-united-arab-emirates>

PART III

Workshop Proceedings

Around 12 years after ICI was launched, the Middle East is in upheaval and the security situation against which NATO as well as partners in the region need to devise and implement policies and strategies a widely different one: Most notably, the US forces left Iraq in late 2011; the Arab uprisings have swept over the region, most tangibly impacting Syria but also others, including the GCC countries with most of them experiencing protest and widespread demonstrations; the GCC decided to launch a joint military command; a Saudi-led military coalition including all but one GCC member (i.e. Oman) intervened in Yemen; an agreement was reached with Iran on resolving the nuclear dispute, which entailed a lifting of related economic sanctions; and of course, the IS emerged on the scene taking control of vast areas in Iraq and Syria, but also orchestrating attacks in European capitals. Moreover, while relations between Russia and NATO soured in the European theatre, given developments in Ukraine, Russia's and NATO members' active involvement in Syria have further strained relations.

Against this backdrop, this event sought to bring together experts and officials from the region, NATO, and Europe to engage in an analysis and assessment of NATO's cooperative efforts in the region, most notably via the ICI, but also through its role in Iraq. The event raised and discussed the question as to what NATO's cooperative efforts in the region – in more concrete terms, ICI and the partnership with Iraq – have achieved so far and what the current challenges and the future prospects are. It aimed at scrutinizing the balance sheet, understanding both achievements and failures, and highlighting past, present, future challenges.

Political Dialogue and Practical Cooperation in a Changing Context

The security environment completely changed with the end of the Cold War. NATO adopted a new Strategic Concept in 1991, which was made public for the first time in the Alliance's history. Former enemies started visiting NATO Headquarters and engaged in a security dialogue and cooperation with the Alliance within the framework of the newly formed North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC). The Partnership for Peace (PfP) was launched in 1994 in an effort to expand practical cooperation between NATO and single countries. Issues such as the democratic control of armed forces, transparency in defense budgeting, and interoperability loomed large. Later on, a number of PfP countries were to join the ranks of NATO, which was to become the first Western institution to welcome new members. Notwithstanding the fact that concern and uncertainty existed in terms of a

potential Russian reaction to the evolving relationship between many former Warsaw Pact members and NATO, Russia, too, was invited to cooperate with the Alliance alongside other partner countries. The country participated in the NACC and joined PfP in 1994. Russia and a great number of other partners also contributed forces to IFOR (Implementation Force), SFOR (Stabilization Force) and KFOR (Kosovo Force).

The Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) was launched in 1994 starting on the premise that the security of NATO was inextricably linked to developments in the south. Developments in the Middle East and Mediterranean came to bear on the security of NATO member-states and partners, the understanding went. However, while there was wide-reaching agreement on part of Eastern European countries to cooperate with (and even join) NATO, no such understanding existed in countries such as Egypt or Jordan. To the contrary, from NATO perspective, misperceptions and prejudices muddled the image of the Alliance in the region. This in turn laid bare the need for a dialogue with countries from the region on NATO, its mission, and goals. This is why the initiative was coined and focused on a “dialogue”. Dialogue was, however, later supplemented with practical cooperation.

Even though the ICI was only launched in 2004, contacts and cooperation between NATO and some Gulf countries existed even before. While some were participating in Afghanistan, others served as a transit route for the NATO training mission in Iraq. The initial idea had been to include the Gulf countries in the MD, which, however, both the Gulf countries as well as MD countries rejected. Consequently, the ICI was launched as a separate but complementary initiative. The initiative, too, rests on two pillars: political dialogue and practical cooperation. It aims to assist ICI countries in modernizing their defense forces to enhance their resilience in face of security challenges. NATO is interested in enhancing its relationship with Gulf countries, including those that have not joined ICI yet, i.e. Saudi Arabia and Oman. The establishment of regular working-level ties between the secretariats of GCC and NATO is another objective in this regard.

NATO’s Partnerships – Functions and Limitations

Cooperative security constitutes one of NATO’s core missions today while the 1990s and 2000s were marked by a remarkable expansion of partnerships. These partnerships are expected to fulfil five core functions: 1) enable dialogue and confidence building; 2) support defence and security sector reform; 3) contribute to capability development; 4) address common threats or security challenges; 5) overall, mitigate existing dividing lines.

Dialogue and confidence building constitute the heart of cooperative security and relevant efforts, of course, do predate the end of the Cold War. Cooperative security works through dialogue at various levels, through confidence and security building measures (to enhance transparency, for instance), through changing mutual images, building common activities, projects, and interests, as well as through developing personal relationships. Notwithstanding its significance, cooperative security nonetheless has its limitations, which are, for instance, visible in the NATO-Russia relationship or in the US-China dyad, both of which face certain challenges and problems after years of dialogue and confidence building.

Defence and security sector reform has constituted a central component of partnerships, especially of the PfP. NATO has given support to the reform of armed forces, defense policy, and security sector in partner countries through advice, training, exercises, or material assistance. Unsurprisingly, such efforts, too, face certain limitations. Their impact, for instance, depends on a partner's commitment to reform and its absorption capacity. The reform can only go as far as the partner wants it to go. Moreover, certain problems and impediments might be more entrenched and go well beyond the realm of security and defense; corruption constitutes a case in point.

Capability development cannot be decoupled from defense and security reform. NATO's assistance to partner countries in their endeavor to develop their capabilities initially focused on peacekeeping and humanitarian roles. Starting in the 2000s, counter-terrorism, and later national self-defense emerged as additional areas emphasis was given to. Sometimes, capability development can, however, have unintended or undesirable consequences. The focus put on peacekeeping and expeditionary warfare might, for example, undermine capabilities for self-defense. Sweden can be cited as a case in point: In its defense and security policies, the focus first moved from territorial defense to peacekeeping, which was assisted by NATO. 20 years later, questions arise relating to the country's self-defense capabilities. Today, Sweden is partly moving back its forces to territorial defense. NATO's or NATO countries' "reluctance" to arm partners is another issue that needs consideration in this context (see the case of Ukraine, for instance).

Addressing common threats or security challenges unquestionably constitutes one of the core objectives of partnerships. Partnerships provide the framework – both political and institutional – for relevant joint action. Such joint action was, for instance, performed in the Balkans or in Afghanistan. At the same time, however, opportunities for joint action or operations might decline "with a less interventionist NATO". The level of contribution by partners (substantive vs. symbolic) and their inclusion in decision-making are further issues that arise in this context.

Mitigating dividing lines has constituted another objective of NATO's partnerships. The partnerships were devised to mitigate existing dividing lines and avoid new ones. NATO has pursued a "dual-track eastern policy", on the one hand, admitting new members and keeping the door open for further admissions, and, on the other hand, forming partnerships with non-members and non-candidates. However, this policy has only been partially successful. NATO has, for instance, not succeeded in convincing Russia that the Alliance's enlargement did not pose a threat to its security and that the two actors could have a true partnership alongside an enlarged NATO. The question arises as to whether there is a need for an "enlargement endgame".

Overall, NATO's partnerships have been a very "valuable innovation" with "inevitable limitations"; they do not constitute a "silver bullet", so to speak. The context against which these partnerships operate is much more complex in the Middle East where NATO has built up a diverse set of relationships (see MD, ICI, partnership with Iraq, etc.). Consequently, in the Middle East, too, partnerships can be seen as a supplementary tool rather than a game changer.

NATO and Cooperative Security in the Middle East

There is a security interdependency between NATO and the Gulf states. What happens in the region has implications for NATO states while Gulf states face some level of a "security deficiency" and require NATO's support. Most Gulf states have small armed forces (see, for instance, the armed forces of Bahrain and Qatar), which gives rise to questions about their capability to defend themselves. For this reason, it was no surprise that the small Gulf countries welcomed and readily joined ICI. Even though ICI does not imply a defense or security guarantee, it provides the participants with some "sort of a comfort zone". The cooperation with NATO within the framework of ICI adds to the security of these countries as NATO can especially help in terms of sharing its "best practices" with these states. Spending more on defense alone is not sufficient for guaranteeing security. What is more, the security situation is likely to worsen rather than improve over the years as the region is likely to face even more turmoil. Consequently, cooperation with NATO will preserve its relevance.

Nevertheless, there are a number of challenges undermining the prospects for enhanced cooperation between NATO and GCC countries. First and foremost, there are various issues that burden relations among GCC countries themselves. Efforts to take forward cooperation within the framework of the Gulf Cooperation Council have produced some results (see the Peninsula Shield, for instance) but have, overall, not delivered what was expected. Recently, the idea of achieving greater regional integration has been revived. However, given past experience, there is some skepticism as to whether this will deliver tangible results (Oman has already declared that it would not become part to a Un-

ion). It is also illustrative that only four out of six GCC countries have joined ICI so far. The larger countries, i.e. Saudi Arabia and Oman, have preferred to stay outside (their defense spending accounts for 70 percent of the total defense expenses of GCC countries). In Oman's case, a desire not to harm relations with Iran was decisive. Saudi Arabia's choice not to accede to the initiative was conditioned by domestic factors. Without these two countries, the "picture is not complete." The question is to what extent effective cooperation between NATO and GCC can be possible as long as these countries fail to sort out their differences.

A closer look at the cases of single countries helps to understand the specific needs of these countries and expectations from cooperation with NATO. To start with, Bahrain is one of the four GCC countries to have joined the ICI. Its geographical location, on the one hand, endows Bahrain with geostrategic significance; the country, for instance, hosts the Fifth Fleet of the US Navy. On the other hand, though, its location also entails a number of challenges. The security challenges that Bahrain faces can be summarized under five headings: 1) Iran that has issued a great number of hostile statements towards Bahrain in the past years; 2) cyber terrorism; Bahrain has invested widely into e-government and was confronted with around 3,000 electronic attacks within the first six months of 2016; 3) regional power imbalances; Bahrain's armed forces only count 8,200 active-duty personnel, which is obviously miniscule when compared to Iran's military, for instance; 4) potential changes in the international alignment choices of specific actors; 5) regional instability and its implications for Bahrain.

Bahrain has concluded an Individual Partnership and Cooperation Program with NATO for the period 2016 to 2018. As a partner, the country has also contributed to the training of Afghan police. Apart from its geographic location, there are a number of other factors that add to Bahrain's significance as a partner: Bahrain has been modernizing its naval forces through the past three decades. The country has been displaying preparedness to act as a security provider and "intervene militarily in regional crises." Bahrain also contributes to anti-terrorism efforts and in 2014, for instance, hosted an international conference on countering the financing of terrorism. Bahrain has distinguished relations with single NATO members-states. For example, Bahrain and the UK concluded an agreement on establishing a support facility for the British navy.

Nonetheless, the relationship between NATO and Bahrain remains subject to a number of limitations and obstacles. There is still a gap between the security needs of Bahrain and what NATO can provide. Given the security challenges mentioned above, the question arises as to what extent cooperation with NATO can offer a remedy – for instance, if Bahrain faced external aggression or a major cyber-

attack. Furthermore, the assessments of security threats and risks on part of NATO and Bahrain are not fully congruent; with the question relating to the sources of terrorism constituting a case in point.

The UAE, too, has been participating in the ICI from the very beginning. The fact that the relationship is personally handled by the defense and foreign ministers of the country is illustrative of the significance the Initiative has in UAE eyes. In line with this, the UAE was the first country in the region to open an office with NATO. In practical terms, the UAE and NATO have engaged in consultations and joint exercises relating to maritime security, counter-piracy, and energy security. The cooperation was reinforced and expanded with the IPCP signed in 2016. The UAE has also attended NATO summits (2014, 2016) as an observer. UAE put forward programs in areas such as de-radicalization or intelligence sharing.

The UAE also participated in and contributed to NATO operations in Bosnia, Libya and Afghanistan. For instance, UAE special forces operated in Afghanistan for 11 years. As European countries were reducing their engagement in Afghanistan, the UAE also deployed fighter aircraft to the country. Next to Australia, the UAE was the only non-NATO member-country to do so. In Bosnia, the UAE declared its support for air operations early on. Apache choppers were deployed to the region. UAE also provided peacekeepers. In Libya, the UAE was the only Arab country along with Qatar to participate in the military campaign.

In terms of UAE's threat assessment, the two major issues seem to be Iran and political Islam; both have been on rise after 2011. At the same time, there has been a shift of attitude on part of the US public after the experiences made in Iraq and Afghanistan. The understanding is that interventionism elsewhere creates in fact more problems than it solves. One can observe a departure from the Carter Doctrine of 1980, so to speak, holding that the US would intervene militarily if necessary to protect the oil wells in the region given their significance for the States. However, in strategic terms, oil is not as important as it previously used to be.¹⁶ This tangible trend to disengage from the region is likely to continue. This sort of disengagement pushes the countries of the region to look for alternatives to the US, while NATO is not viewed as the one single alternative. At the same time, there have been moves to expand ties with Russia, China, or India. These ties are not meant to replace ties with NATO, but to supplement them.

¹⁶ The question relating to the role of energy in shaping relations with Western countries and the GCC cannot be given a clear-cut answer to. In contrast to what has been said above, in Europe's case, the dependency on energy supplies is likely to continue. For this reason, it will be difficult to remain insensitive to developments in the region putting respective deliveries at risk.

Against such a background, the UAE has also chosen to move closer to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. They supported Saudi forces in Bahrain and do the same in Yemen. The country is working to diversify its relationships and play a greater role on a regional level rather than solely focusing on homeland security. Alluding to this notion, the country is “appearing to be constructing a new port next to As-sab International Airport in Eritrea, which could become its first permanent military base in a foreign country.” The country has also chosen to deepen its relations with Russia and China. Their relationship with NATO is taking form against the background of these other relationships. For this reason, the UAE seeks not to jeopardize any of these ties unless the benefits of deeper engagement with one party outweigh the costs induced in terms of the relationship with other parties.

In contrast to UAE and Bahrain, Oman has chosen not to join the ICI. This Omani decision has to be put into perspective and evaluated against the background of Omani foreign policy choices in general. Oman is a multicultural and heterogeneous country, where the principle of cohabitation bears heavily on domestic as well as foreign policy choices. In terms of the latter, Oman opts for neutrality. Omani foreign policy builds on four main pillars: 1) establishing ties and entertaining good relations with all neighbors; 2) “internationalist outlook”; 3) pragmatic foreign policy in light of strategic necessities rather than ideology; 4) preference for cooperative security.

Oman, overall, tries to balance its relations with Iran, the GCC, and partners from the Euro-Atlantic zone. However, this is not to be mixed up with keeping equidistance to all three actors or groupings. Currently, Oman is a bit closer to the GCC than it is to Iran or the West. With regard to the latter, the country has a special relationship with the UK and US. They closely cooperate on political and security issues and share economic ties. Oman was the first Arab country to sign a security accord with the US. There are three US airbase installations in the country, with Seeb serving as “the major transport and logistics hub”, for instance. This alludes to the fact that Oman views US presence in the region as a necessary factor for securing peace and stability.

Oman was much closer to the GCC in the 1970s when the country even brought up the idea of establishing a Gulf Army, which was, however, not supported by other countries in the region. The country also supported the creation of the Peninsula Shield Force in 1982. Nonetheless, in spite of having a great interest in entertaining close ties with other GCC countries, today, Oman is not supportive of the idea of a union. The security context has changed when compared to the 1970s and 1980s. In light of the situation today, Oman views “active neutralization” as the better option. Accordingly, Oman does not want to put its relations with Iran at risk. In spite of political and economic relations flourishing in the past three decades, Oman has not been interested in extending the relationship

into the security realm. This has given Oman the possibility to act as a mediator between the West and Iran, as was seen in the case of the nuclear dispute with Iran.

In line with its policy of “active neutralization”, Oman has been clear on not joining “the wars of others”. The country only offered its assistance in cases where UN Security Council resolutions mandated such action. This was the case, for instance, in light of UN Security Council Resolution 1378 (2001) relating to Afghanistan: Oman granted permission to “NATO forces to use its airspace and airbases”. Oman has not joined the ICI for a number of reasons: Among others, it did not want to harm ties with Iran or see its neutral status being questioned. The country also prefers bilateral agreements with the UK or the US to cooperation with NATO.

Oman might have to adapt its foreign policy and make some choices should the context change dramatically. Should, for instance, the nuclear dispute with Iran be revived and Iran’s relationship with the West deteriorate significantly entailing a necessity for Oman to choose one side or the other, Oman would probably not “sacrifice US or UK relations for Iran”. Under such circumstances, the country might even move closer to ICI.

Saudi Arabia, too, has opted for not joining the ICI. A major threat Saudi Arabia perceives are Iranian arms shipments to Hezbollah affiliates in Bahrain. These weapons end up in Saudi Arabia. Apart from that, there is also a network of training. The Houthis, too, are seen as a threat to Saudi Arabia and the security of the Gulf. Nevertheless, one argument was that the struggle in the region was not between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but, in fact, between the US and Iran. The image of a bipolar struggle between two regional forces “each with a sectarian identity or a sectarian orientation” was not accurate, the argument went. Instead this was a struggle between the US and Iran, wherein the Gulf monarchies were perceived as US allies. As a consequence, should there be an estrangement between the US and Saudi Arabia, the nature of the Iranian-Saudi dyad would also change.

Next to the four GCC countries, Iraq is a NATO partner, too. When relations between Iraq and NATO kicked-off in 2004, Iraq’s security and governance in general were handled by the Coalition Provisional Authority. The security situation was dire. While it was disarmed, the borders were open, and there was nobody to offer guidance to the “newly born Iraqi government”. Iraq experienced large-scale terrorism and criminal incidents. Given this, the staff of regional and international organizations as well as of embassies of various countries were withdrawn. Terrorists from other countries could enter the country and settle down in Iraq.

Against such a background, NATO Training Mission I started in July 2004 upon a request by the Iraqi government. Next to training, the mission also supported and coordinated equipment donation. Between 2004 and 2011, around 15.000 personnel participated in the training offered. As the mission ended in 2011, NATO and Iraq signed a cooperation agreement in 2012 and a MoU on sharing information in 2013.

NATO's assistance has gained additional importance in the face of the threat posed by ISIL. The Alliance accepted a request by Iraq to "start an initiative to rebuild" Iraqi defense capabilities in 2015. Within the framework of this Defence Capacity Building program, NATO started training Iraqi forces in Jordan in 2016. This program is expected to be expanded into Iraq; i.e. NATO will also start training forces on Iraqi soil. One issue that the Iraqi government needs to cope with relates to popular mobilization forces, potential crimes committed by these forces, and relevant DDR activities once peace is restored in the country.

Conclusion

Overall, NATO's partnerships have been a very "valuable innovation" with "inevitable limitations"; they do not constitute a "silver bullet", so to speak. The context against which these partnerships operate is much more complex in the Middle East where NATO has built up a diverse set of relationships (see MD, ICI, partnership with Iraq, etc.). Consequently, in the Middle East, too, partnerships can be seen as a supplementary tool rather than a game changer.

While NATO cannot offer a security guarantee, the cooperation still induces security benefits for the countries of the region. A benefit in terms of raising security can come in different forms such as capacity building. Moreover, rather than engaging with single actors separately, the initiative provides a pathway for engaging with the Alliance as a whole. This will not necessarily entail a formal security guarantee. However, the entanglements created will make it harder for NATO countries to turn a blind eye on the region if crises emerge.

What is more, even though a lot has been achieved in terms of NATO's partnerships, there still seems to be room for improvement. For instance, sometimes, specific interests of single member-states interfere with the interest of NATO as such. On the other hand, partner countries participating in NATO initiatives such as MD might have different interests and threat perceptions. One size fits all approach might be problematic. It is essential that partner countries clearly communicate their needs and expectations. The question should be clarified as to whether the Alliance can make a difference in these terms. The ownership of the partnership should rest with the partner country.

If one looks at the bigger picture, extending and expanding cooperation between NATO and EU seems crucial. 22 out of 28 members of the EU are NATO members anyway. A Joint Declaration was adopted in summer 2016. The two institutions underscored the need to deepen cooperation to better cope with hybrid threats, for instance, or strengthen maritime security and European defence industry. The implementation of steps taken to achieve declared objectives will be reviewed by the two Institutions.

Relations with Russia, implications of Brexit, role of Turkey are also issues that will arise in the future.